

# **A First Nation Chief's 'Secret Path' to Orthodoxy**

**The Path of An Aboriginal, A Chief of the Mohawk Nation,  
Led him to the Bosom of the Orthodox Church<sup>1</sup>**

**(A Modern-Day Story of Orthodox "Lunacy"  
in the Native Reserves of Canada)<sup>2</sup>**

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Saturday night. Very few lights were on. In the Russian Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, Vespers have just started. The shadowy silhouettes of the few faithful who were attending the service became more defined, as the candles were lit, one by one, in the candle stand. The iconostasis of the altar was very imposing; it was something that was carved by experienced craftsmen at the beginning of the century.

A "gladsome light" in Slavonic gave one a sense of inner peace and restfulness. At that moment everything seemed to be a prayer; for the day that passed and the day that was to come. After the frenzy of the day, this refuge of thankfulness actually calmed the beasts of the mind.

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<sup>1</sup> This article, originally titled "The Passing of An Indian," was first published in the Greek magazine *Synaxis*, volume 86, in a special issue, "America, America."

<sup>2</sup> Translation by K. N.

In the dim, half-light I could discern a few of the profiles there: an old Russian lady with her grandchild, a tall, skinny, middle-aged man, a young girl around fifteen, a young family with their two children . . . and suddenly, my attention was caught by a figure near the large window. Directly below it, I made out a silhouette that was completely different from all the others. It was a fifty-year old Indian with vivid, characteristic features, and his long hair tied back in a ponytail that reached his waist. My gaze rested upon him . . . What a strange figure in here . . . I imagined he was just a visitor. At the end of the service, I couldn't fight the urge. I approached him, eager to meet him.

"Yannis," I said to him in English. "Welcome."

"Vladimir," he replied.

"I'm Greek. And you?" I asked him.

"So am I," he replied.

I was stunned . . . That was the last thing I expected to hear!

"Do you speak Greek?" I asked.

He paused to think for a moment, then quoted in Greek: "In the beginning was the Logos and the Logos was with God, and God was the Logos." Just as he finished saying this phrase, he burst into laughter. I was at a loss for words . . .

"I am Mohawk," he said sharply. "But somehow, I also feel Russian and Greek and Serbian and Romanian, because . . . I'm Orthodox . . . A glimmer appeared in his eye, as it did in my heart . . . "

This was how Vladimir and I met. His name, before becoming Orthodox and being baptized Vladimir, was Frank Natawe. I so craved to hear his life story – both out of curiosity as well as genuine interest. Much later, we became friends. We shared many conversations and walks together, especially in his native village. He showed me paths and manners totally unknown to us Europeans. And always simply and unpretentiously, with no trace of arrogance. When I was with him, I always had a strong sensation of instruction, and whenever I admitted this to him, he always said that all beautiful things are mutual.

That first period has become unforgettable, when I was swept away by my youthful enthusiasm, and I kept asking him difficult questions. He would always calmly reply:

“I don’t know – will you tell me?”

Once, when I was fed up with hearing myself say “I don’t know,” I begged him to tell me something, so, he showed some pity and said:

“Well, if you insist, I will tell you, after I ask my friend.”

He sprang up and then lay down on the ground, placing his ear to the ground.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I am asking the Earth,” he said, and before I could recover from my surprise, he added somewhat hesitantly, “Like Aliosha Karamazov.”

I never again insisted on replies. I guess that with him, I was just living the surprise of a sudden lightning bolt that gives birth to a gentle rain that nourishes the earth.

It has been some time now that Vladimir has left us. His passing away – along with his will and testament – overwhelmed me. Now, that feeling of his presence, instead of fading into oblivion, appears before me every so often, and I thought I should record his experiences, images, memories, words and expressions, to sketch a portrait of his presence amongst us . . . hopefully, so that my ear will also perceive . . . the tumultuous silence of the mother earth of Vladimir-Karamazov to me.

Vladimir was born and lived all his life, until the day he died, in the Mohawk village of Kahnawake (or Caughnawaga), an “Indian Reserve” just outside Montreal.

The Indians, or First Nations as they are more often called now in Canada (or Native Americans in the U.S.), along with the Inuit (the “Eskimo”) are the indigenous inhabitants of America. As such, they are seen by many North Americans today as “enjoying” special privileges and treatment denied to other citizens, such as not needing a passport, exemptions from some taxes, receiving financial support from the federal government. In fact, these are rights gained at great cost to themselves, through treaty as sovereign nations with the occupying “white” European nations, in return for the largely peaceful surrender of vast areas of their territories – “mother earth” as they call it.

These treaties originally, at least nominally, recognized the indigenous peoples as sovereign nations, confined them to diminutive enclaves – reserves (in Canada) or reservations (in the U.S.) – and the original equality degenerated into an arrogant cultural superiority, an

unkind paternalism, that justified attempts by the “white” governments to extinguish the native cultures, to eradicate their “savage” ways. The resulting malaise has led to abnormally high alcoholism and suicide rates amongst them. The struggle for survival, individually and as a people, has been a daily concern, and they are justly proud to have preserved their traditions and languages in the face of overwhelming pressures.

In truth, the “savages” have had much to teach the “civilized” Europeans and, in fact, have given many gifts to the world, most often without acknowledgment, and amongst them is their form of government. The Mohawk people are governed in a unique manner. Their supreme authority is the confederacy of five principal native nations: the Mohawk, Onandaga, Seneca, Oneida, and Cayuga. As a political union, and as a democratic government – leadership was not inherited, but by selection – the Iroquois Confederation, also known as the People of the Longhouse, predated European settlement of North America. The image of the longhouse implied that the nations should live together as families in one longhouse, the Seneca being the guardians of the western door, the Mohawk, the guardians of the eastern door and the Onondagas in the center, the guardians of the hearth.

It is claimed that Iroquois Confederation influenced the United States constitution when it was drafted in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. While the European Enlightenment then paid lip service to the ancient Greek ideals of democracy and political organization, Europe at that time was governed exclusively by monarchies and aristocracies. The Iroquois Confederation provided a working model that the rebelling American colonists could emulate, even if failing to acknowledge their debt. A significant difference between the two; however, was that the Iroquois

constitutionally included women, whereas the Americans would exclude them.

There is a mutual respect amongst all of the Iroquois nations. There is a respect for the chiefs and the elders, and for the elderly women of each nation, and of one generation for another. Their love and respect for each other is the foundation of their Confederation.

In the territory of Kahnawake there are three nations, the majority being Mohawk. The village, numbering 5,000 souls today, was built in a strategic location next to the St. Lawrence River, about 1600, and is the main center of the Mohawk people. Recent generations have gained a reputation, to the point of being stereotyped, as fearless workers in high steel.

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"Our village", Vladimir told me, "along with other native reserves was turned basically into a Roman Catholic protectorate in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Catholic missionaries had actually tried in every way to forcefully convert our entire community. Not with love, but with a noose around the neck. They trampled on centuries-old traditions and they used other ones as springboards for their own designs. I myself, up to the age of 32, had kept to the trodden path. As my mother, who was an elder leader of our nation used to say, 'By day a Roman Catholic for the eyes of the world, and by night an Iroquois, for the eyes of the soul.'

"But at the age of 32, I couldn't tolerate that kind of restriction, that noose that I was wearing, so I rebelled in my own way . . . I researched our roots, I learnt all of our native tongues, I studied at white men's universities, which for a native of my generation was a very unusual thing. For years, they had me as a travelling lecturer of

comparative linguistics. Quite often, I would dishonestly play the clown at their academic games, since to them I was a rare, exotic species of bird, with a different kind of plumage.

“I used to compare our words with their French or English equivalents; our habits with theirs. There were times that I felt as though they were observing me like archaeologists observe fossils. To me however, those meetings alone – those cultural meetings – regardless of the response, contained joy and grief together. My rebellion was still thundering, because it was muted, like the tread of a rabbit . . . My mother – the pillar of our community – was to me a source of wisdom and immense pain. She was my . . . Indian Zosimas . . .”

(He took a deep breath and continued).

“My path to the Orthodox Church was a ‘secret path,’ as we say in our tongue. There came a time, that I became caught in her net, and ever since then, I have been treading very discreetly, carrying a very heavy cross. It happened to me through linguistics. It was always the subject that impressed me most. By taking linguistics courses, I became impressed when I happened to read the lives of Saints Cyril and Methodius, who are known as the Apostles of the Slavs. I was especially intrigued by the Cyrillic alphabet and the pursuant Slavonic tongue. I asked my professor if there was any chance I could listen to Slavonic being spoken. He suggested that I should visit one of the Russian churches.

“I rang one of them, but I heard only the answering machine. I rang the next day, and a friendly voice informed me that Vespers was held at 7 in the evening, and that Sunday Service was held at 10 in the morning. I asked if I could attend. He replied of course I could. I told

him I wasn't Russian, or Orthodox. He responded that the Orthodox Liturgy was not only for the Russians or only for the Orthodox, but for all people. So, I mustered some courage and went on a Saturday evening to listen to spoken Slavonic and to meet the priest, who had spoken so pleasantly. He was a priest-monk from Montenegro in Serbia. His name was Father Anthony . . . He, too, has passed away now . . .

"Well, anyway, the first Saturday that I attended Orthodox Vespers in the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, I experienced something unprecedented. Looking at the icons, listening to the melodies, observing the penance bows and the prostrations, the fragrance of the incense wafting in the atmosphere, were all reminiscent of my having discovered the 'secret path' . . .

"You won't believe it, but, every now and then, I can discern parallels between the native traditions and Orthodox tradition. Somewhere inside me, this discovery fulfilled my native ethos and supplemented it. At first, I felt I was floating among the clouds. During my first liturgy, I asked if I could stay on after the benedictions for the catechumens . . . They said: you may. So I sat down, like an Indian dog! After that, I began to go more frequently. At first, on Sundays only, then on Saturdays, and later on, during weekdays, whenever there were important feasts.

"It wasn't much later that I noticed confession was taking place in the evening, after Vespers. It was the period of Lent. At the end, they all asked for forgiveness from the priest. He placed his stole over their head and blessed them with the sign of the cross. I stood in line, but they said:

"'You can't, you're not Orthodox. This is a Holy Sacrament.'



“‘But our entire life is a sacrament,’ I said.

“I pondered again, and asked them, ‘So, how can I become Orthodox?’

“‘Talk it over with the priest,’ they suggested.

“Not much time had passed by, when I decided I wanted to become Orthodox. On the day that it was to take place, there was a snowstorm that didn’t allow me to leave the village. It was postponed, for the feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos to the Temple. And that’s how it finally happened . . . I was given the name Vladimir.

“Much later, when reminiscing over my reception into the Orthodox Church, I drew out of my memories the imposing figure of a Serb priest, who had visited our village when I was young. His appearance and his manner had left a deep impression inside me. I remember my mother having commented ‘Now there’s someone who isn’t making propaganda with his truth . . .’.”

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Quite some time had passed, when I decided to visit Vladimir again. This time, I went with two of my friends and a little car, equipped with tape recorders and microphones, and we departed one sunny morning for his village, Kahnawake. He had suggested that we meet at the Mohawks’ radio station since he had been the radio commentator for several years, and had promised us walks and conversations in their territory. We did find him at the radio station in the village, with headphones over his ears, reading the morning prayer in each and every Indian tongue, then in French and English. Naturally, his audience did not detect him making the Orthodox sign of the cross.

We waited respectfully until he had finished. He removed the headphones and approached us . . . He was more talkative than usual, and somewhat more cheerful.

“What would you like me to tell you?” he asked warm-heartedly, “And what could you ever want to learn from me?”

“Tell us whatever you want,” Gregory replied. “Say, for instance, something about your people, your celebrations, your mission . . .”

“You’re going too fast,” he interrupted, “One thing at a time.”

“Well . . . my people . . .”

It took him some time to formulate his reply. He was seated in an armchair, but found it was not comfortable for him . . . he abandoned it and sat down on the porch with us . . . he preferred to be on the same level as us.

“My people are simple, just like their food. The chief of the nation is a man, but he is elected by the council of women-elders of the nation. All of our group rituals take place in the “longhouse.” This has two doors. The men enter through the eastern door and the women from the western one. It is a simple edifice, just like most of our rituals are. In our marriages, an integral part of the ritual is the blessing of the elders. During our funerals, for both men and women, when they are carried into the longhouse they enter through their separate doors, but the head of the deceased always faces the east. After nine days, we prepare the funeral meal, but without salt . . .”

He suddenly jumped up, because the record he was broadcasting over the radio had stuck. He put on another record, made an announcement, and came back to us.

“What were we talking about? Ah, yes! The rituals. I will show you the longhouse, before it gets too dark . . . Now, about our celebrations. The entire year is a celebration,” he burst out laughing, “We have the mid-winter festival (four days long); we have the snow festival, the first bloom festival, the first crop – which is the berry; the festival of plenteous harvest (thanksgiving), the threshing festival (four days), the festival of surplus, of rain and of sowing, and the cycle starts all over again. Something like an ecclesiastic calendar of our holy earth . . .”

He took another deep breath and continued, “We don’t say much, nor do we eat much; we don’t get angry often, we love what was given to us and we continuously give thanks for the bounteous gifts . . .”

“Do you happen to have any tobacco?” he asked me. “No, I said.”

“You know, we chew our tobacco – in other words, we eat it. We don’t smoke it. When you smoke it, it turns into air, whereas if you eat it, it becomes one with you, and you bless the earth that gave it to you . . . Now, what else did you ask me? Ah, yes! About my mission . . .”

“What can I say? My people got tired of the missionaries. They have been coming here for years, mostly to take rather than to give. They never showed any interest in what we have. They just brought on the steamroller, they flattened everything, and then they embarked on their . . . evangelical sowing.

“But that Serbian priest was different. He actually gave something, with his presence . . . he took nothing from us, except a piece of our

heart. That was what I loved, when I later read about Saint Herman of Alaska and the Orthodox missionaries amongst the [Aleut and Tlingit people]; it is impossible for the mind not to make comparisons . . . as hard as it may try [not to see them].

“I still remember that Jesuit, who told me to my face that he was instructed to teach spirituality. When he left our home, my mother shook her head in disapproval, saying, ‘We, my child, are a spiritual people, while he, even if his Christ came to him, he would sit Him down to preach at Him . . . .’”

“Are there any other Orthodox amongst the Indians?” Gregory asked again.

“I have met an Orthodox Inuit in Plattsburg, and one more – a very tall Mic Mac. There may be others who I’m not aware of. But in the Mohawk hospital we do have a couple of Serbian doctors, the Moscovites. Real gems of people; they have a special love for our world, and they offer all their assistance.”

Lesley looked him directly in the eyes.

“Tell us, if you want, about that story with the native masks.<sup>3</sup> It was in all the newspapers and they all mentioned your name. What happened exactly?”

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<sup>3</sup> For the reader’s information, I will briefly report the events. The Canadian government decided to open a new museum in Western Canada, in the city of Calgary, where it would put on display, amongst other exhibits, a number of Indian masks, which it had “borrowed” in an “unorthodox” manner from a longhouse, as folklore artifacts. This provoked the indignation of the Iroquois, who assigned Vladimir to look into the matter, to visit the exhibition – at the expense of the government – and to give his opinion to his people, as well as to the government.

Vladimir sat down, cross-legged, and after taking a few minutes to think, replied, "To us, those masks are sacred. We always keep them in the dark, and we protect them with silk material. They represent the . . . holy personage that we are in search of. We find it in silence, in darkness, where we also find the light of our soul. Our soul is never displayed in exhibitions or in artificial lighting . . . Those who organized the exhibition lost every sense of what is sacred, and that is why they strive to 'gently' remove it from our souls also . . . We love the earth, because it knows how to keep silent and be fruitful. We have learnt to humbly love it and to honor it. It is something like Orthodoxy's Holy Mother . . . since you like parallels. But, I have said too much . . . Let's get up now, and I will show you my village . . ."

We got into the little car, and I sat in the driver's seat. Vladimir was the co-driver. He began to show us all the landmarks:

"Here in the centre of the village you can see the Catholic church. It is dedicated to Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, an Indian woman whom the pope proclaimed a saint. We keep her bones, which perform miracles, in this church. This is a pilgrimage for the laity. Her life is as beautiful as a fairytale . . . To me, she was a fool in Christ . . . She was a grace-filled fool. She would roll over in the snow, to purify her heart . . . My fellow villagers – who became Catholics – are not particularly fond of Catholic propaganda, but they do show reverence to their saint; it was their pressure on the Vatican that brought on her beatification . . . Next to the church, there is a small museum. In there, you will find a map of the Confederation, that describes in detail all of the Iroquois nations, the symbols, the numbers, the places they originated from, their historical course, their languages . . . Everything has become a part of the museum . . ."

“Now turn right, here . . . This is our Cultural Centre. Above it, is the radio station where we met . . . That is where I broadcast from . . . Now, during the Triodion, and afterwards, during Lent, I play a lot of Western spiritual music and little by little, I include some Orthodox innuendos, but only just enough as to not be provocative. Iroquois spiritual music is not permitted over the radio. It is only for the ‘longhouse.’ The cultural centre is financially supported by the ‘white’ government. The powers outside, of the ‘civilized’ world, want to help us, but only on paper; in actual fact, they want to drown us, to humiliate us, to exhaust us – not so much us, as our souls, and whatever we carry. They want to turn us into masks for museums, clowns at parties, research for archaeologists . . . They haven’t taken a whiff of, nor do they suspect what kind of, tobacco we prefer.”

He burst into laughter. I nearly lost control of the steering wheel. I continued to drive on, following his instructions: left . . . right . . . straight ahead . . . until, at a bend in the road, we saw a modern but very unusually shaped structure.

“This is our school, Grade School and High School. It has a good program, I like it. It is truly Mohawk. Apart from the classic subjects of ‘white’ education, we have many other lessons that are most probably unfamiliar to the whites. We don’t call them ‘customs’ or ‘culture,’ but Iroquois ways, Iroquois paths (the sounds of the earth), Iroquois dances, Iroquois songs and cries (like an ancient drama), Iroquois law, and other things. The grounds surrounding the school are sacred. We also have a ‘dark room,’ but not for photographs . . . it is for the making of the . . . mask inside us.

“Now go straight ahead, eastward. Continue, until you find the highway. Two, three kilometers from there . . .

“This here is our hospital. It is a new building, and it is a new idea for us. A beneficial one, I hope. It was built in 1985. Before that, we had our own medicine men or we resorted to the white man’s hospitals. But they were difficult. Most of their staff was unaccustomed to our ways; it was difficult for them to look after our old folk. They have to be in our shoes, in order to understand . . . Many try. Besides, you can tell apart those who truly love and who can be discerned from the usual professionals . . .”

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Vladimir Natawe was the chief of his nation; he was their spiritual leader. It was he who recited at their funerals and their weddings – he was something like a priest for them. In the evening, he would sit cross-legged in the longhouse, listening to his people’s problems and solving them with the advice he offered. He had a judge’s role, which was one of their most powerful traditions. He was a poet and a translator, and also a philosopher. He knew their problems better than anyone else; he also knew the strict laws that governed their nations. Those who denied their ancestral principles and became Christians were allowed to remain in the village, but were not given any office. They would have to leave the council of the wise, the elders; they would “lose their destiny” as they described it . . . in their own special kind of way, they would be disowned. All of this may not be of much significance for an ordinary Indian, but for a chief . . .

No one in the village ever found out until the day he died that their chief was an Orthodox Christian. And Vladimir, who was Frank to them, lived and worked with them, for them, with the ever-present fear that they might find out. He had to be perpetually moderate, careful, flexible, otherwise his image would have been smashed inside them. He was in charge of the radio station for years, and he also worked at their

Cultural Centre. He was considered an authority on subjects of tradition, and was unimaginably touched, whenever he found "parallels," as he called them, in Orthodox tradition. He shared many of his experiences with us, because he couldn't share them with his own people. What a heavy cross to bear . . .

Whenever I would see him coming out of the inner sanctum of the little Orthodox church of the Sign of the Theotokos, which held services in English and French, dressed as an altar server and holding the candle in front of priests and bishops, I couldn't help wondering what kind of heart that old Indian wolf had inside him, who persistently said "God knows." And he would forever be prostrating himself on the ground, so that God would give him enlightenment to govern his people through tempests and ordeals, and to give him the strength to hold up the heavy load that was given to him, right to the end.

The years passed. Every friend that visited us in Montreal had to make the imperative trip to the Mohawk village, and to meet Vladimir. And many of them told me that they had recorded their own experiences there.

One morning, I received a phone call in Montreal, telling me that Vladimir had passed away in his village. The question that arose in my mind was: who was going to bury him, what was to become of him? He had; however, left a specific, written instruction for all the rituals to be done in the Indian tradition in the longhouse and for an Orthodox priest to read the prayers over him. Naturally, the Indians had no idea what he meant by "an Orthodox priest," but he had left a few telephone numbers, too.

They did actually phone, and an Orthodox priest went and recited the funeral service before they carried Vladimir into the longhouse.



Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to attend the ritual in the longhouse, but a mutual friend, Michael, who attended the funeral conveyed the details to me.

Two days after the funeral, Michael brought me the news, together with a package. He told me that he had attended the entire ritual. It was truly impressive. When they go to the longhouse, the Indians put on the outfits that befit their rank in the village. The ritual, which was of course in their own language, had a particular form, much like the old, Byzantine, type. At the end, the chief's testament was read out aloud, before all the people. In his will and testament, he mentioned where he left each of his belongings. Vladimir was 75 years old at the most. He had children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He left something to every single member of his family.

At one point, the Indian who was reading the will found some difficulty in reading a name, a non-Indian name and, after grimacing a bit, he put on his glasses and pronounced the name, in a distorted kind of way: "Ya-nis Ha-ji-ni-ko-la-ou." My friend Michael raised his hand and they gave him the package, which he in turn gave to me.

When I opened the package, I saw what was inside: it was a book, *The Divine Liturgy*, in Greek and in English, which I had given to Vladimir many years ago. Inside, on the first page, it said: "To Yanni," and below that, in Greek: "Until we meet again – Vladimir Natawe."

I took this to be a very kind gesture on his behalf; he had in fact inserted those words before his final departure; perhaps because he had sensed that his death was near. He had written the words "Until we meet again" in Greek.

Of course, the surprise did not end there. When I leafed through the book, I was astounded, my mouth agape . . . Vladimir had translated the entire text of the liturgy into the Mohawk tongue, above the lines of the English text! Of course I can't read Mohawk, but I am holding on to the book as a memento – this Orthodox Liturgy by Vladimir in Mohawk – the entire Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom . . . If God bestows on me the honour, I may publish it one day . . .

Contemporary stories like this one may sound like a fairytale, because our life seems equally fleeting. And yet, these stories are filled with a never-setting light; they are modern-day testimonies of that blessed “lunacy,” that yeast, which leavens all of the dough, from the tiny church atop an Aegean islet, to the distant native reserves of Canada.

“Until we meet again, Vladimir . . . Karamazov . . .”

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